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ABSTRACT

An effort was made to determine freshmen student perceptions of academic advisory programs, pre-registration material, and summer orientation. To ascertain these perceptions a questionnaire was sent to all freshmen on the Orono Campus of the University of Maine. Approximately half of the students found the summer orientation program to be helpful, and the most useful academic information acquired was about courses they needed to take. The most useful experience was getting acquainted with other freshmen. Having the experience of living in a residence hall for a short time was the second most helpful, and in last place was meeting with university officials. Regular advisors were found to be more helpful than summer advisors. The underlying theme was that advisors need more factual information about available courses and the requirements for various majors. Materials which freshmen believed would be most helpful to incoming students included a description of all courses available to freshmen and a brief description of each college available in capsule form. Suggested uses for the results of this study in college advisory programs for incoming freshmen are discussed. (RSM)

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FRESHMAN STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

OF

ACADEMIC PROGRAMS AND ACADEMIC ADVISING

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Dean of Freshmen

Report No. 1
Freshman Study

CG005266

University of Maine

Orono, Maine

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FRESHMAN STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC PROGRAMS AND ACADEMIC ADVISING

A questionnaire was mailed to all freshmen students on the Orono campus to get opinions about some student concerns during the freshman year, an appraisal of information sent to them prior to entering the University from the student point of view, their perceptions of the helpfulness of the academic advising system and recommendations for change, and an evaluation of the summer orientation program in retrospect with recommendations for future programs. All freshmen were contacted rather than drawing a sample because it was felt that the individual student needed to feel that his opinion was important. Of 1781 questionnaires mailed, 1239 (69.8%) were returned, 1195 of which were usable, or 66.7% of the total mailed. Replies were received in the same proportion by college as there are freshmen in that college.

Data were tabulated for frequency and percent of response and cross tabulations made by college for selected responses. In addition to the checked items, there were many written comments. They have been analyzed for content and summarizations of findings related to academic advising are included in this report.

The freshman questionnaire was mailed between the Thanksgiving and Christmas recesses with instructions to return it before the Christmas recess began. Theoretically all students had had an

opportunity to see their regularly assigned academic advisor at least to get mid-semester grade reports or for preregistration for the spring semester. Impressions of the academic advisor's helpfulness were based on this limited contact.. Perception of the person who acted as academic advisor during Orientation also was based on a single contact.

University and College Student "Profile"

The majority of students in the class of 1973 are from Maine and the other New England States, sixty percent of them come from communities under 10,000 in size and about one-third were in high school graduating classes of 100 or less. Very few are from metropolitian areas (3%) or from really large high schools--graduating class over 500 (6%). As would be expected, ninety seven percent are under 20 years old. The ratio between male and female students is nearly 50-50 (M 54%, F 46%). Maine was the first choice of sixty seven percent of the freshmen and eighty eight percent are happy with their choice of college in the University. Most of them indicated that they decided to attend Maine because of the programs offered, for financial reasons, and because it was near home.

THE ACADEMIC ADVISING PROGRAM

To ascertain which phases of the academic advising program were seen as most effective or helpful, a series of questions were asked which related to the experience of freshmen with individuals giving academic advice during the summer orientation and in the academic year. They also were asked to indicate whether the advisor was in

the college in which the student was enrolled and if he was in the student's proposed field of study. One might expect a student to be curious about his advisor and find out to which field and/or college he was attached. Some (4.5%) respondents left the questions unanswered and some of them made marginal notes of "I do not know." Eighty nine percent(88.9%) indicated that the advisor was on the faculty of the college in which they were enrolled.

Some confusions about college seemed to be expressed by the Agricultural Engineers because of the dual nature of the program. (It is a joint responsibility of the College of Life Sciences and Agriculture and the College of Technology). It is likely that some students in transition programs were unsure of how to answer the question. However the numbers are small in both categories.

Summer Orientation Advisors

Few freshman indicated that the summer advisor was very helpful but when the categories "very helpful" and "moderately helpful" were combined over one third of all replying indicated that the person was helpful. Almost another third indicated they had little to say about their program because it was planned for them. (On the pre-test some students indicated that they did not feel the advisor was helpful but it would be unfair to say he was of no help at all when there were no course choices during the freshman year; therefore this item was included as an alternative). College differences were most noticeable on this item. Seventy three percent of the Technology students marked the pre-planned program alternative, and forty four percent of the Life Sciences students indicated pre-planned programs. About

an equal number of Technology students found summer staff helpful as found them of no help at all (5%), but thirteen percent did not attend orientation. Three times as many Life Sciences and Agriculture students said summer advisors were helpful (35%) as said they were of no help (12%). Of the other three colleges, between 25-30% indicated that the advisor had been of no help at all.

Student comments written next to the questions or in the space provided for comment and suggestions gave helpful information. In all colleges, but especially in Arts and Sciences, freshmen indicated that the summer person did not know the courses available or what a particular program required. They felt that not enough explanation was given for selecting electives or for taking required courses. Some indicated that they needed more help with filling out schedule cards. The lack of time to talk about plans and to explore vocational outlets was mentioned several times, particularly by Education students.

Academic Year Advisors

In contrast, the regular advisor whom most had seen only once was considered helpful. The number of responses to the "no help at all" category varied from four percent of the Life Sciences students to twelve percent of Arts and Sciences students. The largest percentage of those not talking with an advisor was in Technology (25%); followed by sixteen percent of the Business Administration students who indicated they had not seen the advisor.

Comments were, in general, similar to those made in relation to Orientation advisors. The underlying theme seems to be that advisors need more factual information about courses available, and requirements

for various majors. Although a few remarked that an advisor tended to push his own field, others said they wished an advisor would give more information about his field and the long range opportunities in it.

Implications for Advising

One cannot assume that freshmen have a clear picture of either the philosophy of the college in which they are enrolled or of the general content of the subject matter in the field in which they have indicated an interest. Selection of college and/or major is often based on little more than influence of family and friends or a vague conception that a person who scores high in mathematical aptitude should be an engineer. Unfortunately the secondary schools often do not do a very adequate job of educational-vocational advising and the nature of adolescents seems to lead some to act on "I'd rather do it my way." Therefore it behooves the University to utilize the means at its disposal to assist these students very early in their college careers to understand the nature of higher education, particularly as it relates to a specific college and program.

There should be continuity between summer advising and that done during the academic year. The summer program seems to be the crucial one for freshmen. This is when they have the initial contact with the advising system. It should be positive and helpful for the majority of students, not for less than half of them. This is when freshmen (and their parents) have the greatest number of questions and the most anxiety about the unknown. They need to feel reassured, understood, and important. A poor experience with a

representative of the University which results in improper course selection, lack of adequate information and eventual registration confusions may set an unhappy tone for the first year if not lead to complete disillusionment about the University. If the student can follow through with the same advisor, or at least with advisors with similar points of view, he will be more satisfied.

The persons chosen to assist students with course selection, whether it be in the summer or during the academic year, need to be well informed about general programs and philosophies of the various colleges. Although the advisor must know about his own college he should also have more than a vague idea about the others. If he is a specialist in a particular field, then he must have some concept of the broad vocational opportunities connected with it. Too often the advisor is seen as a discouraging person rather than as a helpful one because he says in effect you cannot do anything with only a bachelor's degree or there aren't any good jobs in the field unless you are exceptional in performance.

How can we select people to assist the underclassman, especially the freshman, with the interest and patience to support, to answer seemingly inconsequential questions, to explain "why", and to encourage academic curiosity rather than stifle it? Do we need to assign each student to a specific advisor if he is uncommitted to a discipline? Must all advisors be members of the faculty? Selected students who are trained in the basic philosophies and requirements of the college, or department, can be helpful additions to the advising team; many of them have struggled with the same questions and found

answers. Faculty, too, need to be given the same basic information if they are to do good jobs of advising. Both students and faculty on a team need to be aware of their own limitations and the added resources available among themselves for the academic needs of students. They also must be aware of resources on the student personnel and student services staffs. Members of these services are available for helping students meet their educational, social, emotional, or other needs and are an integral part of the advisory team.

If we are to utilize the information gathered from students, then we would devise an advising system which could be flexible. For those who need educational-vocational advice in conjunction with course selection, it should be available. For those who want to explore ideas with an adult, they should be able to find such a person within the advisory system. For the student who has fairly well-defined goals and prefers to regulate his own program, there should be provision for a minimum of supervision. The ultimate aim of good advising should be to give students the tools with which they can become increasingly able to develop their own programs; this must start with their first contact with the University.

FRESHMAN APPRAISAL

OF

PRE-REGISTRATION INFORMATION AND SUMMER ORIENTATION

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Report No. 2

Freshman Study

University of Maine
Orono, Maine
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FRESHMAN APPRAISAL OF PRE-REGISTRATION INFORMATION AND SUMMER ORIENTATION

A questionnaire mailed to all freshman students toward the end of the first semester was designed, in part, to get an appraisal of the information sent to them prior to entering the University and an evaluation of the summer orientation program. Immediately following the two-day program in the summer the participants were asked to react to the general plan on an open-ended critique sheet. This was filled out before leaving the campus. The questionnaire was more specific and attempted to get an expression of the helpfulness or usefulness of the program when the student was confronted with the realities of coping with the academic situation.

The critique sheets tended to reflect a general satisfaction with all phases of the summer program. Students liked the friendly atmosphere, the contact with the few upperclass students who helped, and thought most presentations of academic programs and campus life were good. There were a few criticisms, mostly about waiting in line for advisors or missing a library tour because of poor timing. On the whole, the returns conveyed an almost euphoric tone. At that point in time students had no frame of reference for evaluating the usefulness of the orientation experience.

Of 1781 questionnaires mailed in the fall, 1195 usable returns were received, or 66.7% of the total mailed. Replies were in the same

proportion by college as there are freshmen in that college. Approximately thirteen percent (12.6%) of that number did not attend orientation or did not reply to the orientation questions. Hence, a smaller number answered the orientation questions than answered questions pertaining to the informational literature.

Academic and General Information Received Prior to Registration

The University and its various colleges prepare materials to be distributed to prospective students and to those who have been admitted. Some information is of a general nature and some is specific to the college. It would be of some help to the persons preparing informational publications if they knew what was seen as useful by the student. New students do not always have access to each publication, partly because the uninformed do not know what to ask for, as the catalog, or do not receive asked for material if it is out of print.

Two questions were devoted to the current material and one to possible new materials. Freshmen were asked what were the most useful and the least useful publications containing academic information. It was possible to respond to more than one of the choices:

The University catalog
The description of the freshman program sent by the college to which you were admitted
The pamphlet, "Introduction to Maine"
None of these

The greatest number of those replying indicated the catalog was most useful. There were many write-in marginal comments, however, which indicated a student had requested a catalog and not received one. Some

of the same respondents answered the "least useful" category by checking the catalog choice. No tally was kept of how many commented that they did not receive a catalog and also checked that it was the least useful information they received. Presumably the number was small. The catalog and material prepared by the colleges were seen as useful by about half of the students.

TABLE 1

ACADEMIC INFORMATION RECEIVED PRIOR TO ARRIVAL

Publication	Most Useful N*	Most Useful %	Least Useful N*	Least Useful %
University Catalog	570	47.7	130	10.9
College description of freshman program	481	40.2	175	14.6
"Introduction To Maine"	295	24.7	409	34.2
None of above	287	24.0	569	47.6

*Multiple responses possible

The least useful publication is "Introduction to Maine." This is not surprising as the Introduction is designed to be used in lieu of the catalog for general information, not for academic program planning. Many students and high school guidance counselors, however, seem to regard it as a substitute catalog for course selection. At least that is the information related by students who have been confused about proper selection of academic programs.

Freshmen placed in rank order the kinds of information they thought would be helpful to prospective freshmen. Not all answered

the question. Of those responding, 32.8% indicated they would like a description of all courses available to freshmen as a first choice and 29.3% placed this information in second place. The next highest in rank order for first place was the entire catalog (25.3%) and a brief description of the program for each college in capsule form (24.2%) was third; this also was second highest for second place (23.1%). The least useful information for incoming students was seen to be a listing only of the names of courses available to freshmen (43.7%).

Material which freshmen believe would be helpful to incoming students can be ranked in this order of importance:

1. A description of all courses available to freshmen
2. A brief description of each college in capsule form
*3. The University catalog as it is now written
*4. A general information brochure and the catalog(s) of the colleges(s)
5. A list of the names of courses available to freshmen.

Perceptions of the Summer Orientation Program

Freshmen were asked to indicate whether, in retrospect, the summer orientation program was helpful, pleasant but not necessary, not particularly helpful or relevant, or useless. They also were asked the same questions in relation to other freshmen. Slightly over half of students answering thought it was very or moderately helpful for themselves (54.3%) but sixty two percent thought it was probably helpful to other freshmen. Nine percent thought it was useless for themselves but only four percent thought it useless for others. The number responding

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*There is no appreciable difference in rank between 3 and 4

to the question about others' perceptions was twelve fewer than those answering in relation to themselves.

TABLE 2

USEFULNESS OF ORIENTATION

Appraisal	For Oneself N=1069		For Others N=1057	
	N	%	N	%
Very helpful	187	17.5	160	15.1
Moderately helpful	393	36.8	505	47.8
Pleasant but not necessary	212	19.8	199	18.8
Not particularly helpful or relevant	177	16.6	149	14.1
Useless	100	9.3	44	4.2

In an effort to determine whether students looked at the orientation programs differently after they had attended the University for three months from the way they appraised it in the summer, they were asked to respond to the same choices from two different points of view. Question 33 stated: "Immediately following the orientation program I thought that the most useful academic information I received was..." Question 35 stated: "Having attended the University for half a semester, I now believe the most useful academic information I received during orientation was..." Some changes in perceptions of usefulness occurred but not enough to be significant. There was a slight change from "courses I planned to take" to "courses I needed to take." Learning about "academic programs in my college" was seen to be more useful in the fall than it was in the summer.

TABLE 3

ACADEMIC INFORMATION

Most Useful Academic Information	Summer N=975		Fall N=978	
	N	%	N	%
About academic programs in my college	133	13.6	168	17.2
About courses I planned to take	201	20.6	166	17.0
About courses I needed to take	226	23.2	256	26.2
How to set up my class schedule for fall	107	11.0	99	10.1
Concerning vocational opportunities in my vield of interest	23	2.4	29	2.9
Where to find help with academic problems	212	21.7	188	19.2
How to understand the grading system	73	7.5	72	7.4

These indications of perceived usefulness should be accepted with caution. Aside from the very small differences noted, there seemed to be some ambiguity in the questions asked according to the frame of reference of the respondent. Three colleges have academic year orientation programs. Marginal comments would seem to indicate that a few students equated "orientation" with these courses rather than with the summer program.

The same type of question was asked about non-academic information. Question 34 stated: "Immediately following the orientation program I thought that the most useful non-academic information I received was..." Question 36 stated: "Having attended the University for half a semester, I now believe the most useful non-academic information..." There were

only three choices for these questions, where to find campus buildings, how to use the university library, who to go to for help with personal problems. There was a slight shift in perception of usefulness from where to find campus buildings for the summer point of view toward how to use the library seen as more important in the fall. The same cautions should be noted for these responses.

TABLE 4

NON-ACADEMIC INFORMATION

Most Useful Non-Academic Information	Summer N=1015		Fall N=1002	
	N	%	N	%
Where to find campus buildings	597	58.8	525	52.4
How to use the University Library	265	26.1	327	32.6
Who to go to for help with personal problems	153	15.1	150	15.0

When asked to rank order the most helpful experiences during summer orientation, becoming acquainted with other freshmen was ranked first by 486 and second by 204 students. Having the experience of living in a residence hall for a short time was the second most helpful experience (288 placed it first, 211 placed it second). In last place was meeting with University officials--such as deans and the president. Meeting with upperclass students and getting acquainted with faculty advisors were placed about in the middle. Not all students ranked all options, therefore there is no clear-cut distinction in order except for the top place and last place.

Student Suggestions for Orientation

It was hoped that freshmen would have some suggestions about future summer programs. Small group discussions without parents present and library tours were the two activities freshmen thought should be kept in the program for another year. Students wanted parents present in the general informational lectures and parents should have campus tours. Students were less definite about parent involvement in other activities although library tours for parents were seen as important. Small group discussions with freshmen was the least popular of the suggested activities but about one third of the respondents thought it a good idea. A fairly large number (408) thought parents should not participate with students in any activities. On the other hand, 334 thought they should attend meetings about academic programs and 303 thought they should attend all activity programs. The questions asked were:

> Parents should have opportunities to learn about university life in sessions by themselves (i.e. without freshmen) for these kinds of information (Rank Order).
>
> a. Academic programs, including grading system
>
> b. Campus activities and cultural events
>
> c. Campus problems and concerns - e.g. social rules and regulations, drugs, etc.
>
> d. Items a,b,c
>
> e. None of these activities
>
> Parents and freshmen should be together for these kinds of information (Rank Order).
>
> The same five choices as above were given

Rank ordering seemed to be a difficult concept for some to grasp in

spite of an example in the general directions. Many did not rank all choices, selecting only one or two, so that an accurate analysis of replies was not possible. The first two choices were evident and the last one usually was easily determined. In the above there was a tendency to rank only a,b, and c. A better choice of wording for d and e probably would have obviated some of the difficulties encountered in rank ordering these statements.

TABLE 5

RANKS ASSIGNED TO PARENT-STUDENT PARTICIPATION

To learn about:	Alone	Together
Academic Programs	2	1
Campus Activities, etc.		3
Campus problems & Concerns	3	
All 3 of equal importance	1	2

Freshmen think that the best way to learn about academic programs during orientation is to have question and answer periods with the faculty (N=299) and to have discussions with student staff (N=297). Both of these were ranked first. When first and second place N are combined a question and answer period with faculty places first (N=531); discussions with student leaders are second (N=442). These figures may reflect student perceptions of fall semester courses as well as of the summer orientation programs. The question did not specifically refer to summer and a few marginal comments reflected a different frame of reference as noted.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPING INFORMATIONAL MATERIALS AND PROGRAMS FOR INCOMING FRESHMEN

In what ways does a prospective student learn about a college or university? On what does he base his opinions about the academic world he hopes to enter? There seem to be two primary points of impact, the written word and on-the-spot observations. For most students and for many parents the first picture of the institution -- its curricular offerings, academic philosophy, and social and cultural programs -- comes through publications. Experience on the campus, although brief, can show some of the realities of "being in college." More is needed, however, than a quick trip on a college-hunting tour and a pleasant talk in the admissions office. It behooves a university to put its best foot forward in pre-registration publications and in providing for a meaningful orientation to the campus scene. Both students and parents need to know what is expected by the college. Information from students about their indoctrination experiences can be invaluable aids to those responsible for developing informational programs and activities.

Publications

Publications for the new student are sometimes confusing. There are as many approaches to the academic program as there are colleges within the university. Each college has some publication of its own: some have detailed explanations in composite publications such as the catalog and Introduction To Maine, some academic information may be found in the Student Handbook distributed after students arrive in the fall; most social information is included in the same publication.

There is a need for a composite publication for the freshman in addition to the public relations type of information which is widely distributed to the secondary schools. Inasmuch as many new students seem to be unaware of the offerings of each college and of the interrelatedness of colleges within the university, and many are not sophisticated about selecting a college, freshmen could profit from a publication which presents the picture of each college in such a way that each student can compare the major purposes, philosophy, and basic course requirements of the individual colleges. Perhaps this will help prevent some of the frustration and unhappiness of the misplaced student. Such information should be made available to secondary school guidance personnel for it is they who often steer the students into specific programs. (Written comments plus information from interviews of freshmen reveal that frequently counselors base judgments on inadequate or erroneous information and out-dated materials.)

The questionnaire indicated that students found the catalog the one most useful bit of information received, followed closely by the college's program information. The catalog is expensive to produce and contains much information which is not necessary for the beginning student, in fact it may be confusing. Therefore something which combines the most appropriate sections of the catalog and the basic freshman information of each college might have more relevance for the freshman.

Students also indicated they would like descriptions of available

freshman courses. One way to meet this need might be to include these in a freshman handbook. Another way to fulfill the need might be to use a method used by many universities, a separate catalog for each college be bound separately rather than included in an omnibus catalog. The student could then request a general information catalog plus that of the college or colleges in which he was interested. It is worth investigating the relative costs and usefulness of separate catalogs. The freshman handbook would then be a part of the series of available publications of interest to the new student: general information catalog (fees, housing, financial aid, how to apply, etc.), handbook of academic and other pertinent information for freshmen, the catalog of course descriptions for a specific college.

Orientation Program

The emphasis of the students seemed to be on the non-academic aspects of the orientation program such as getting acquainted with others and learning about the location of campus buildings. There is no doubt that this is valuable and that to feel comfortable in one's surroundings is one of the requisites for a relatively easy adjustment to the college experience. It does raise questions, however, about the primary reason for attending college. It would seem that the introduction to the university should place enough emphasis on the academic so that it takes on an importance at least equal to the social and physical aspects of campus life.

Forced choices from a limited selection of alternatives may tend to lead respondents to indicate the most enjoyable aspect of the

program rather than the most helpful or useful bits of information for future use. By the time freshmen responded to the questionnaire all parts of the introduction to the campus may have tended to blend into one amorphous whole. Nonetheless the various colleges and the director of orientation should endeavor to alter the structure of the orientation program in order to place more emphasis on the academic.

In one sense the students did ask for more academic involvement. They wanted more small group discussions with faculty. This is a logical vehicle for imparting academic information.

Inasmuch as freshmen ranked the talks by academic deans, personnel deans, and the president at the end of the list of importance, one might consider the role these people should play. Perhaps tailoring the program more to the individual college will help to determine what will be the wisest use of administrative personnel. Students probably should have an opportunity to meet their academic dean face to face and to recognize him as being the head of the college in which they are enrolled. Some deans, however, have assistants who work primarily with members of the incoming class. It may be that this assistant is the appropriate person to talk about the academic offerings of the college. Some deans are not necessarily good speakers, nor do they enjoy that type of presentation. That dean might prefer to meet students in a different way. The ultimate choice of personnel, content of academic information, and best procedure for imparting that information should be the prerogative of the dean

concerned, not that of the orientation director or of the orientation committee except that the plan must be compatible with the general program.

If the findings of the freshman study are utilized, then the orientation experience could be even more meaningful than it has been. Constant revision of any program is needed to keep it relevant.